

S.M.A.K. (Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst) is excited to present an exhibition of works by the German photographer Thomas Ruff (b. 1958, Zell am Harmersbach), a leading figure of the Düsseldorf School of Photography. *'Lichten'* shows examples of five of the artist's series, covering the last 35 years, from the late 1970s to the present: from a semi-documentary approach to a post-digital photographic strategy, from natural to virtual light.

The exhibition is centred on two new series by Ruff: *'Phg'* (Photograms, started in 2012), a virtual simulation of the classical genre of the photogram, and *'Negative'* (started in 2014), with its first museum presentation at the S.M.A.K., in which the artist reaches back to photography's roots in the 19th century. In addition, the exhibition presents excerpts from *'Sterne'* (1989-1992), *'Nächte'* (1992- 1996) and his first series, *'Interieurs'* (1979-1983). Technical considerations, rendered in images of stars at night, infrared shots of city suburbs and domestic still lifes, provide a political and social perspective on the status of images. In its historical span, the show extends beyond the limitations of analogue photography with the seemingly limitless possibilities of contemporary image production.

Instead of photographing our daily reality, Ruff focuses on portraying the realities of photography. His working process is based on the methodology of what was called a "scientific artist". In each of his series Ruff uses the medium of photography to undertake a systematic analysis through which social, political and aesthetic aspects of image-making are reflected, and thus also the history of Modernity. The question of the nature of light, still not fully explored, is fleshed out as the show's leitmotif: in each of the series light assumes a different function, ranging from the gentle documentary illumination of home décor in post-war Germany in *Interieurs* to the relation of space and time in *Sterne*, via an artificially rendered artefact in the photograms.

Furthermore, one of Ruff's *'phg'*-series is produced in collaboration with the Jülich Research Centre in North-Rhine Westphalia. By stretching the power of the scientific institution's supercomputers to their limits, Ruff's works may also be interpreted as indirect portraits of machinery. At another level this collaboration between an artist, a museum and a science centre represents a new model of cooperation between the arts and the natural sciences.

About the exhibition Photograms

The exhibition is centred around a new series of Thomas Ruff's *'PHG.'* (2012-) This series represents a radical extension of his work, since for the first time he recreates a historical photographic genre, along with its aesthetic and cultural connotations: the camera-less technique of

the photogram, which is mostly associated with the 1920s and its progress-oriented zeitgeist. His predecessors, such as Man Ray and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, placed objects directly onto photosensitive paper and exposed them to light, creating white or grey silhouettes wherever they made contact. Such photograms showed unanticipated light effects and allowed for the element of chance in the final result. The process carried revolutionary or even surreal promises of a more direct representation of light than photography mediated by a camera – even with the aim of embracing “the ghost in the machine”. In his first photograms, Ruff directly quotes a number of historical works, for example, r.phg.05_I (2013) refers to the series ‘Photogenic’ (1946–1955) by the photographer Lotte Jacobi. This attests not only to his respect for his predecessors, but also to his desire to place the new series within the larger tradition of the photogram – possibly because, technically speaking, the two have nothing in common. Ruff’s virtual interpretation of classic photograms suggests an equally radical method of simulating light using calculations based on optics. Common objects such as lenses, rods, spirals, paper strips or spheres are rendered in 3D and placed on or over digital photo paper in a virtual darkroom. Ruff then uses programmed instead of natural light to expose the objects. The huge amount of data involved makes the rendering process barely controllable, so that all the works display random effects. These are zones of chance: visual noise, grain, fuzziness – visual phenomena we closely connect with the analogue image and which in this virtual environment present themselves as the limitations of a purely digital process. Furthermore, Thomas Ruff manipulates the image, experimenting for instance with different lighting conditions, transparency, solarization and generated surfaces (paper, glass, high-gloss chromium) and with colour – which was impossible for traditional photograms. The fact that Ruff is pushing the boundaries of technological feasibility to simulate a historic photographic genre is a comment on the past advent and current decline of modernist Utopias and the related notions of unlimited progress. In the same way he highlights our contemporary “instagram” aesthetics, the permanent creation of an on-the-spot patina for the immediate past.

Interiors (Interieurs)

Thomas Ruff’s earliest series, ‘Interiors’ (1979-1983), shows a single part of a room with as much simplicity and detachment as possible. The brightness enters the image only indirectly – windows appear in a mirror or their presence behind closed curtains can be assumed. The light appears as if through the lens of a ‘camera obscura’ and, with pronounced psychological connotations, illuminates conceptions of life and intimacy in post-war Germany. There is also a special focus on the plane and two-dimensional surfaces, such as wallpapers, carpets and mirrors, and this underlines photography’s function of showing a reality of a second order – the reality behind the camera. By using colour in art photography instead of the black-and-white technique common at that time, Ruff

distances himself from his teachers and the dogmas of documentary photography in the same way as such American artists as William Eggleston and Stephen Shore.

By presenting a further seminal series such as 'Nights' (1992-1996), the exhibition touches upon the current political discourse on surveillance technology. These photographs were shot at night using a camera with the ability to intensify available light, and show outdoor scenes in suburbia. The works use the visual vocabulary of long-lens night-vision surveillance photography, whereby the camera's light-intensifier produces a characteristic greenish glow. This technology was used during the Second Gulf War to identify targets. The low-level light device enables the human eye to detect objects in profound darkness by intensifying the available light electrons, which are normally insufficient to allow this. The shots reveal what would normally be invisible to the eye. Ruff depicts banal urban environments, whose character is reversed by a visual idiom established by the media shortly after the war: normality becomes the presumed arena of horror. This series was done in the mid-90s, i.e. shortly before the establishment of the Internet, which would later bring with it entirely new forms of media control. 'Nights' is the last series using natural light before Ruff dedicated himself to the digital imaging process and temporarily left his position behind the camera.

Stars (Sterne)

In the 'Stars' series (1989-1992), Thomas Ruff's fascination with astronomy meets a preoccupation with archives and the artistic strategy of appropriation, meaning the re-use of existing image material. The images of the night sky are based on archive photographs that he acquired from the European Southern Observatory in Chile, taken with a specially designed telescopic lens. From the 29 x 29 cm negatives, Ruff selected specific details, using a self-invented classification system, which were then enlarged to a uniformly large scale and given the space coordinates as titles. He combines an ostensibly scientifically objective process with an aesthetically subjective approach. The stars are either in the foreground or the background, or else the focus is on interstellar objects or the Milky Way. It is obvious what the white dots on a black background are, but what's visible in these images is nothing more than the light of stars, some of which have probably been dead for years – but at that moment their light arrived at the camera. The works essentially portray light and time, and these are the basics of photography. Therefore Ruff takes the strategy of the artistic appropriation of existing images, familiar from artists like Marcel Duchamp, Sherrie Levine and Andy Warhol, to a media zero point.

Negatives (Negative)

In a further new series called 'Negatives' (2014 -) – S.M.A.K. is the first museum where this series is being shown – Ruff finally goes back to the historical roots of the photographic medium. As in his photograms, this technique transforms works using light as a shadow-maker. Ruff is working with found sepia-toned photographs, mainly from the middle and end of the 19th century. He digitally reverses their colours, so that they have the appearance of the 'cyanotype', a photographic technique referred to as 'blueprint', which was mainly used for scientific images. It came up as a third method after the 'daguerrotype' and the 'talbotype' in a period when the reproductive medium of photography was starting its crusade beyond the visual arts too: pictures could circulate fast and wider than ever before, and provide new insights not only into our own reality but also into those of 'the Other'. That the same blue colour covers all motives might be also comment, how the at that time new medium of photography has flattened the perception of reality. Ruff's choice of motifs presents various fields in which photography as a medium could be effective: representational photographs from colonial times to art and its histories. In depictions of painter's studios from the middle of the 19th century he goes further and questions the changes in the artist's role, the meaning of the medium since that time: after photography, painting was perceived as something which one looks 'at', rather than a frame one looks 'through'.

Thomas Ruff lives and works in Düsseldorf. His work has been the subject of solo exhibitions at leading international venues, most recently in 2012 with a large-scale, comprehensive survey presented at the Haus der Kunst in Munich. Other recent solo exhibitions include those organized by the LWL-Landesmuseum für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte, Münster, Centro de Arte Contemporáneo de Málaga, Spain (both 2011), Castello di Rivoli, Turin, Museum für Neue Kunst, Freiburg, Germany, Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna (all 2009), Múcsarnok Kunsthalle, Budapest (2008), Moderna Museet, Stockholm, and the Sprengel Museum Hannover, Germany (both 2007). Work by Thomas Ruff is held in museum collections worldwide, including the Art Institute of Chicago, Dallas Museum of Art, Essl Museum, Klosterneuburg, Austria, Hamburger Bahnhof – Museum für Gegenwart, Berlin, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C., the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Moderna Museet, Stockholm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, National Museum of Photography, Copenhagen, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, and the Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst (S.M.A.K.), Ghent.

He is one of the protagonists of the Düsseldorf School of Photography. This school has become synonymous with artistic innovation – it began in the mid-1970s at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf under the guidance of the influential photographers Bernd and Hilla Becher, known for their comparative grids of industrial buildings. Although his work is rooted in the school's objective, almost clinical approach to photography – including compiling sets of typologies – Ruff

acknowledges the inherent subjectivity of the medium. He is best known for his series of staged and generic portraits – his first to receive critical acclaim – but he has been exploring a broad range of themes and techniques, ranging from analogue and digital photographs and computer-generated imagery, to material from scientific archives, and pictures culled from newspapers, magazines and the Internet and then manipulated. Instead of focusing on the centre of visual photographic certitude, Ruff, in the words of Douglas Fogle, “embraces the shadowy world of photography’s dark matter, where the collision between objectivity and subjectivity creates a complex explosion of photographic expressivity”.

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